New York Theatre Critics' Reviews 1949

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1949 PRODUCTIONS

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"At War With the Army"

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NEW YORK POST HOME NEWS
NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
NEW YORK MIRROR
NEW YORK WORLD TELEGRAM
NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
NEW YORK TIMES
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"At War With the Army"

New York Post
HOME NEWS
MARCH 9, 1949

'At War With the Army' Is Slightly Belabored

By RICHARD WATTS JR.

"At War with the Army," which opened at the Booth Theatre last night, is such a friendly and disarming little play that it would take a more acid critic than this reviewer to speakly harshly about it. Indeed, there is no particular reason for anyone to be hard on James B. Allardice's lively farce-comedy on the foolishness of the military mind in a Kentucky training camp in the later days of the recent war. There are a lot of funny things in it. The only trouble is that it is also a little too slender and belabored.

Although there is quite a lot of plot in the course of Mr. Allardice's narrative, it is difficult to pin it down in a first-night review. It is chiefly concerned with the chaos resulting from Army discipline, red tape and regulations during the boredom of preparing for war amid the confusion of life in the Southern hinterland. There is much antic horse play, some of it funny, and, naturally, a great deal about sex and the stuffiness of the military brass. It is all high-spirited and noisy and filled with prankishness.

Soft-Drink Machine

It is characteristic that the most amusing moment is purely mechanical, when a stubborn soft-drink vending machine suddenly begins disgorging bottles by the dozen, in a manner reminiscent of the setting off of the pin-ball apparatus in Saroyan's "The Time of Your Life." There is also a comic scene when the pompous colonel is unexpectedly covered with sundry articles of apparel unwittingly hurled at him by innocent GIs. I tell you this, not to criticize the new play, but to explain its mood and manner.

If there is a central situation, it is probably the story of the impatient First Sergeant Johnson, who wants to get overseas to fight but is in grave danger of being kept from his purpose by the fact that he is in a little trouble with sex and army regulations. It doesn't make for much of a plot device, but it is enough to permit the author to start his characters going through their paces with considerable spirit. There is no doubt that atmosphere, antics and personnel are authentic, but the mechanics are sometimes pretty obvious.

Believable Actors

Under Ezra Stone's direction, the acting is always pleasant and believable. All of the players give commendable accounts of themselves, and it is selecting names virtually at random to say a special word for Gary Merrill as the impatient sergeant, William Mendrek as a harried captain, Kenneth Forbes and Ty Perry as lieutenants, Ernest Sarracino as a sensible corporal, Tad Mosel as a lost and lugubrious private, William Lanteau as an expectant father, and Mike Kellin as a staff sergeant. They add immeasurably to the proceedings.

"At War with the Army" is most successful in its satire when it contemplates the case of the captain whose wife knows the answer to everything military, and perhaps least triumphant when it tries to remember that it has a plot. In fact, it gives the impression that it has most of the material for a play but hasn't managed to sort it out. It is lively, good-natured, human and observing, but it lacks a main situation which might have pulled it together. It is a comedy with funny things, rather than a funny comedy.

'AT WAR WITH THE ARMY'

A farce comedy by James B. Allardice; staged by Ezra Stone; setting by Donald Oenslager; presented by Henry May and Jerome E. Rosenfeld in association with Charles Ray McCallum at the Booth Theatre, March 8, 1949. The cast:

Capt. Ernest Caldwell.....William Mendrek
2d Lt. Davenport..Kenneth Forbes
T/5 Cpl. Clark..Mitchell Agruss
Cpl. Di Ruccio..Ernest Sarracino
Staff Sgt. Krieger..Jerry Jarrett
A Soldier.....Alfred Leberfield
Another Soldier.....Joseph Keen
1st. Sgt. Robert Johnson.....Gary Merrill
Staff Sgt. McVay.....Mike Kellin
A lost private.....Tad Mosel
Pvt. Jack Edwards..Bernard Kates
1st. Lt. Wm. Terray..Ty Perry
Millie.....Maxine Stuart
Mrs. Caldwell.....Sara Seegar
Pfc. Alvin Hawkins.....William Lanteau
Col. Davies.....John Shellie
Helen Palmer.....Sally Gracie

Synopsis: The play takes place in a company orderly room in a training camp in Kentucky. Act I. An afternoon, late 1944. Act II. Scene 1. Early evening, the same day. Scene 2. The following morning. Act III. That afternoon.

The New York Times
MARCH 9, 1949

Yale Drama Student 'At War With the Army' in a Farce Put On at the Booth

By BROOKS ATKINSON

When James B. Allardice's "At War With the Army" was performed at the Yale Drama School last season, it must have seemed sensationally funny. For Mr. Allardice, who is still one of Uncle Marc Connelly's students, writes about the customs and manners of the army with the humorous relish of a man who is no longer in it. No Harvard man would ordinarily expect a Yale graduate student to be so breezy and inventive.

Even at the Booth Theatre, where Mr. Allardice's breathless merry-go-round opened last evening, "At War With the Army" has some very funny scenes. Ezra Stone, graduate of the George Abbott Drama School, has directed it in the noisy style of "Room Service"; and some of the scuffles from one orderly room to another, with privates, officers and comic props ludicrously entangled, are first-rate vaudeville—doors banging, clothes flying through the air into the face of the commanding officer and decorum getting a humorous shellacking.

* * *

But for the heartiest enjoyment vaudevilles ought to last about half an hour. Mr. Allardice and Mr. Stone keep at it all evening, whacking the funny bone and kicking the shins continuously without once changing pace. In the course of two hours noise and speed can get pretty tiresome unless they are steadily developing a plot. All slapstick and no play can wear an audience down.

To hold his whirligig together, Mr. Allardice has a practicable device. First Sergeant Robert Johnson wants to go overseas. But he has a horrible suspicion that he may inadvertently be the father of the little one that Millie, his old girl friend, happily expects to bring into the world. This situation provides the startling misunderstandings that traditionally keep farces in motion.

But Mr. Allardice has no more than a technical interest in this situation. Since he has four doors and a swinging gate to fool with, to say nothing of a recalcitrant Coca Cola vending machine, he rushes a steady stream of wise guys and sad sacks across the stage at about sixty miles an hour, and jumps from one crack-brained crisis to another at the top of his lungs. "At War With the Army" is like an animated joke book. Every scene is like the last picture in a funny-strip—wham, sock, bang!

Mr. Stone chases his actors pretty fast. If Mr. Allardice has squandered enough material for three shows on his farce, Mr. Stone has squandered enough business on it to keep the vaudeville stage in operation for a full season. As the apprehensive first sergeant, Gary Merrill gives an excellent performance that is robust enough to suit the occasion and manages also to sketch a little character into the part now and then. Sara Seegar, who is Mrs. Stone offstage, plays a captain's officious wife with refreshing drollery.

* * *

Amid the general hubbub, no one else has time enough to register anything more than a military type busily engaged in thwarting Uncle Sam. They are pretty good at it, especially three Yale students, apparently now on furlough and no doubt wriggling out of their midyear exams. As Staff Sergeant McVay, Mike Kellin has a frightening voice and the kind of face that haunts privates. William Lanteau's first-class private is a brassy, mischievous scoundrel. Tad Mosel plays a lost private with pathetic humility and silence.

All this goes on inside a sturdy orderly-room setting by Donald Oenslager, a Harvard man who magnanimously gives Yale the benefit of his educated counsel. On the whole, "At War With The Army" is too funny. Mr. Allardice, who obviously has the knack of theatre writing, at least errs on the right side.

NEW YORK Herald Tribune
MARCH 9, 1949

By OTIS L. GUERNSEY JR.

Bulldogs in a Barracks

THE waiting war is once again satirized in what amounts to a string of blackout skits at the Booth. James B. Allardice's "At War With the Army" hangs around the company orderly room of a Kentucky training camp and watches an assortment of officers and enlisted men relieve the monotony of inaction with teasing, buck-passing, goldbricking, wisecracks and women. Staged by Ezra Stone against a single setting by Donald Oenslager, it is a creditable jest which searches in vain for somewhere to go. Much of it is very funny indeed and most of it will remind ex-G. Is of the life they wish they had led in camp. But without a strong central theme to unify it and hold it on a rising line, it eventually becomes rather weary from following itself on.

• • •

"At War With the Army" was begun by Allardice in camp during the war and finished at the Yale Drama School, where the author is still a student. It comes to Broadway produced by a trio who only last year graduated from this school and with three actors who are still studying there, but its virtues and faults are professional. It is less of a story than a collection of characters forced to live with each other in unnatural circumstances by the curious authority of Selective Service, and it looks on while the constant friction of routine rubs humor off of such unfortunates as a thin, plaintive Sad Sack, a bookish clerk, a handsome top sarge, a henpecked captain or an eager lieutenant. It is a pity that it has nothing to build upon and therefore is forced to pretend by merely turning up the volume of each succeeding episode. There is an early laugh in a dressing down given a private by a tough sergeant; a later one in throwing a pair of drawers in the colonel's face. The first is the more subtle, and by far the more genuine.

• • •

The play's highest spots are vignettes of character comedy, and the trio from Yale are right at the front of this parade of folly. Mike Kellin's version of a throaty, whistle-blowing staff sergeant is one of the best bits in the show; William Lanteau's gangling, browbeaten private is a perfect underdog, and Tad Mosel makes an amusing pantomime of a lost recruit. Gary Merrill plays a top sergeant trying to keep his men in hand while avoiding embarrassing contact with an old flame, and he performs smoothly while giving the play the only small point of constant reference which it owns. Ezra Stone stages the encounters on a rising note of slapstick, and he misses the sharp, sure click of a finished farce. No doubt the script presented him with something of a problem, though, and the running about helps to cover up the repetition.

In a fairly large cast, all of whose parts are of nearly equal importance, almost everybody contributes to the gayety. There are William Mendrek as the rather good-natured captain; Mitchell Agruss as something called T/5 whose job it is to point up the gags by reacting to them; Jerry Jarrett as a master scrounger; Maxine Stuart as a pregnant PX girl on a search for a certain fellow, and many others. Oenslager's set represents the inside of a frame building divided in half to separate officers and enlisted men, and it helps to accent visually the only "message" the play contains: that these two classes of Army men react about the same to the same stimulus, whether it be the threat of extra work, a passing colonel's wife or a passing colonel. There is certainly hardly any trace of a play in "At War With the Army," but in it Allardice has written well and with much good humor about what is probably the most rueful discomfort in all experience.

Journal American
MARCH 9, 1949

A Vending Machine Outshines Everybody

By ROBERT GARLAND

Last evening, at the Booth, James Allardice's "At War With the Army" offered exhaustingly energetic entertainment. For three acts and four scenes, a considerable collection of not unattractive performers worked their fatiguesome way through the "new farce-comedy" the locale of which was a Kentucky training camp in 1944.

Under Ezra Stone's frenetic direction, against Donald Oenslager's run-of-the-orderly-room background, the considerable collection of not unattractive performers finally wore the first-nighters down. Just as the players, too, were on the outskirts of exhaustion, a soft drink vending machine took over energetically.

I'll not be surprised if that vending machine, supplied by the Coca-Cola Company and bebottled by the Czecho Peasant Art Company, was the new farce-comedy's outstanding performer. Not since the pinball set-up in William Saroyan's "The Time of Your Life" has the nickel-in-the-slot age furnished so impressive an automatic actor.

While even Messrs. Merrill, Jarrett and Kellin, as Sergeants Johnson Krieger and McVay, were resting from their actorial labors, that automatic actor carried on their teamwork. As bottles and nickels poured from its every opening, raucous laughter rose from every onlooker in the audience. That vending machine should receive star billing . . .

In lights up on the theatre's marquee!

• • •

A Yale Graduate

This "At War With the Army" is a graduate of Yale. The sponsors, Henry May, Jerome Rosenfeld and Charles McCallum, are alumni of Old Eli's School of the Drama. And James Allardice the author, is even now a member of Marc Connelly's playwriting class where, presumably, Mr. Connelly's recent one about the talking horse was concocted.

Mr. Allardice has revealed that the new farce-comedy's original outline was conceived (and I quote) on a slow train through Kentucky (unquote) and the first draft written in Camp Campbell five years ago. A year later, in 1945, it was tested on the Yale campus. Tested successfully, I believe, with Broadway as its goal.

Well, here it is on Broadway. No "Mister Roberts" on the beach, "At War With the Army" is full of sound and fury, signifying that, even with a fighting war on, the army is a military prep school and the soldier is a campus cutup with nothing but passes, lassies and glasses of hard stuff on his mind. The army back home in 1944!

As a farce-comedy made up of movement rather than action, Mr. Allardice's first play tells intermittently of Sergeant Johnson and his concurrent desires to get away from paper work and a girl named Millie. The paper work is purgatorial, Millie is pregnant and the sergeant wants neither of them. The rest is high-jinks and horseplay . . . .

And pretty wearing on cast and congregation.

• • •

The Robot Wins

Consequently, only that vending machine is in there punching when the final stanza of "At War With the Army" comes along. The human members of the cast are exhausted and the equally human members of the audience are exhausted along with them. But the robot, with its bottles and its nickels, is still going strong.

In the considerable collection of not unattractive performers I've mentioned, Gary Merrill's Sergeant Johnson stands out above the others. If the vending machine is to receive star billing, Mr. Merrill should be featured. A graduate of "Winged Victory" and "This Is the Army," he wears his uniform as if he knew it.

Sara Seegar, friend-wife of the director, is passing funny as the know-all, see-all, tell-all lady of William Mendrek's Captain Caldwell. As Private Hawkins, Sergeant McVay and A Lost Private, William Lanteau, Mike Kellin and Tad Mosel are on leave from Yale for "At War With the Army's" off-campus duration.

These, plus Mr. Stone's frenetical direction, Mr. Oenslager's run-of-the-orderly-room background and the remaining members of the cast, are ofttimes over generous with their contributions to James Allardice's new farce-comedy. At best, the in-coming tenant of the Booth resembles an up-and-at-'em movie with a third dimension . . .

And a soft drink vender as its rightful star!

DAILY NEWS

MARCH 9, 1949

'At War With Army' Slap-Happy Farce About Training Camp Life

By JOHN CHAPMAN

Having seen "At War With the Army," which opened last evening at the Booth Theatre, I'm a little mixed up. I don't know whether a young man should join the Army and get an education or go to Yale and learn about the Army. Quite a few of the gentlemen involved in the new play seem to have done both, and the result is a lively slapstick farce.

Although it deals with sweating out the boredom of war in a non-combatant area, "At War With the Army" makes no pretense of being a land-bound "Mister Roberts." It has no undercurrent of seriousness as it skips along from gag to gag, making life in a Kentucky training camp look something like a fraternity initiation in a prep school.

The plot will bear no more scrutiny than it was given by its author, James B. Allardice, who is one of Prof. Marc Connelly's students at Yale. Which means that we can forget about the plot right now and concentrate on more important things like soldiers from the rank of private to colonel trying to liven up World War II by creating their own little disturbances in Kentucky.

Split-Second Timing.

Under the direction of Ezra Stone, the privates and colonels of "At War With the Army" give Donald Oenslager's setting a real beating, going through doors oftener and faster than one can count. Sergt. Stone has drilled them well, and their timing is perfect. If a colonel is to get an armful of underwear flung in his face as he belts through a doorway, he gets it, and if a swinging office gate is to touch a noncom in a tender spot, he gets touched.

Any serious-minded country would, of course, clap everybody in jail for last evening's prank, which shows no respect for the military institution and indicates, in fact, that officers are boobs and enlisted men are lazy, wenching louts.

First to be confined would be Mr. Allardice and Sergt. Stone, and then I'd throw in the rest of the cast, most of whom seem to have been in the Army and some of whom have been practicing subversive activity at Yale.

Good-Natured Cast.

These others include William Mendrek, a captain whose wife knows more about the Army than he does; Ernest Sarracino, a blackmailing corporal; Tad Mosel, a sad and weary little private who manages to be funny without ever saying a word; Gary Merrill, a first sergeant who has more responsibilities than anybody else, including a girl friend; Mike Kellin, a whistle-happy staff sergeant, and William Lanteau, a married private who cannot learn the facts of Army life. Exempt from arrest would be Maxine Stuart, Mr. Merrill's girl friend, because she is cute in a dumb way.

"At War With the Army" is not going to get any prizes and it might even be kicked around a bit for being slapdash and sloppy—but it is offered with complete good nature by a friendly mob of young actors, and I had a good time. That was all I went for in the first place, so I'm satisfied.

New York World-Telegram

MARCH 9, 1949

'War With the Army' Steps at the Double

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

It seems quite a while since the local theater has indulged in genuine slapstick farce, and "At War With the Army" takes up that slack by being a frank and downright circus.

There are no issues at stake here, but just about every gag and plot twist that can be worked on a crowd of men in an Army division passing through its third year in training camp. This is effortless entertainment to watch and hear, and the fact that much of it may seem silly to civilians does not keep it from being youthful, exuberant and joyously funny.

The show is often bawdy with the frankness bored young men employ under monotonous duress. Last night by the end of the second act the audience was screaming its lungs out. If you do not believe a recalcitrant soft drink machine, or a pile of clothes tossed in a colonel's face by mistake, can draw wild guffaws from the crowd, you better go see for yourself.

Slamming Doors.

This is a show in the tradition of "Brother Rat" or the Marx brothers. It races around and slams doors, and anybody mugs. A lot of the comedy is familiar and expected, but this is one of those rare cases where inevitability of humor is welcome.

The theme is that after endless regimented training a fellow concludes that "the Army just don't like a satisfied man." There is a plot that pops in and out, about a 1st/Sgt. Johnson who is terrified that his being sent overseas, or his promotion, or both, will be fouled up by the interesting condition of a former girl friend who works in a PX on the post.

This thread ties together a series of cartoons of hilariously frustrated men trying to reconcile themselves to military life.

The fact that they are all well-known types makes them all the more authentic.

The Captain's Wife.

There is an earnest captain whose wife at her bridge club hears about every new order before he does, and can even produce the answers to unexpectedly assigned problems. There are two younger officers who try desperately to preserve some dignity in the face of the cagey hierarchy of the noncommissioned men.

The colonel forbids the use of lights in the daytime, then cannot see the bulletin boards. The first sergeant inspects the mess four or five times a day and always returns eating. The staff sergeant handles supplies in a fashion that should set him up as a department store owner when he is mustered out.

A simple-minded PFC causes a great deal of misunderstanding over a baby his wife is having at home. Another private wanders endlessly around for his billet, hung with gear like a haberdasher's Christmas tree.

Split-Second Escapes.

There are frequent split-second escapes from meetings which promise discipline, and just as many cases of mistaken identity or turbulent misunderstanding. As audience you are never left out of the secret, and it adds up to as effortless an evening's entertainment as you are likely to find anywhere.

The cast is for the most part little known, and it acquits itself of these high jinks in a thoroughly uninhibited manner. Gary Merrill is the harassed and ambitious first sergeant, and William Mendrek plays the frequently baffled captain. Of the others with showier parts to add to the hilarity, there are Ernest Sarracino, Jerry Jarrett, Mike Kellen, Tad Mosel, Bernard Kates and William Lanteau.

Sara Seegar is the omniscient wife of the captain, and Maxine Stuart and Sally Gracie display just the right lack of intelligence to charm the boys.

The Sun

MARCH 9, 1949

By WARD MOREHOUSE

Noisy Army-life Comedy.

The uproar of an Army training camp in the State of Kentucky filled the Booth Theater last night as "At War With the Army" came in for its first New York performance. The verdict is this: a crude, raucous, slapstick comedy, funny in spots, but hardly more than a passable entertainment.

"At War With the Army" is the work of James B. Allardice, now one of Professor Marc Connelly's brighter drama students at Yale. It's a rather likeable piece, but one depending upon the braying and the bellowing of practically everybody for its effects. The mistaken-identity device is also used and there are more exits and entrances than there ever were in an old Al Woods bedroom farce.

Allardice's noisy little play tears along at a furious pace as it presents the G. I. case against a common foe, the army brass, and gives a recital of the woes of First Sergeant Johnson who, like Mister Roberts, yearns for combat action. But there the Sergeant is, stuck at desk duty with a tank company. He also has his troubles with women and his difficulties in this department bring on a good deal of the ruction of the evening.

There are amusing situations here and there. Such as the scene in which a soft drink machine, out of order for days and full of nickles and bottled goods, suddenly comes to life and empties itself in jackpot fashion. Ezra Stone has given the play energetic direction—his emphasis is always on pace—and there are performances of gusto from an athletic cast.

Gary Merrill is vigorous and unflagging in his playing as the tormented Sergeant Johnson, and Bernard Kates is quite effective as the tormenting private. William Mendrek is entirely believable as a harassed captain, and John Shellie storms about convincingly as a blustering colonel. Jerry Jarrett makes a character of a staff sergeant, as does William Lanteau of a gangling, hillbilly private, always in trouble. Maxine Stuart is entertaining as Millie, the camp tramp, whose pregnancy provides material for several scenes. Donald Oenslager has provided an extraordinarily realistic setting for a company orderly room.

"At War With the Army" seems oddly trivial in this year of 1949 and it is not impressive as a job of playwriting. But it is enough of an effort to win for Student Allardice the commendation and encouragement of his professor at New Haven.

Daily Mirror

MARCH 9, 1949

Author Shows Promise In 'At War With Army'

By ROBERT COLEMAN

An author of promise flashed on the Broadway scene last evening with "At War With the Army," a farce that kept many in the Booth Theatre howling constantly. He is James B. Allardice, a student at Yale University's Drama School. When he learns to complement laughs with substance, Allardice, we think, will be a playwright to watch.

In this instance he has drawn an often-funny, though somewhat contrived, picture of GIs anxious for overseas duty, but marooned in a Kentucky training camp late in 1944. They have the usual encounters with the usual flighty girls, they get into the usual scrapes with their officers, and their immediate superiors have the usual troubles with top brass.

Allardice has used materials that have gone into many previous movies and plays. The materials are too familiar, though he has used them with considerable skill. He has been particularly successful at characterization. His zany types are both real and amusing.

Henry May, Jerome E. Rosenfeld and Charles Ray McCallum have given the farce a creditable production. They have engaged Ezra Stone, who had considerable experience with both the Army and camp shows during the late war, to direct, and Donald Oenslager to design a useful setting.

Stone has paced the play at a fast tempo. He, wisely, doesn't give you time during the performance to analyze its shortcomings.

Gary Merrill is a tower of strength as a harassed First Sergeant. He plays the role with effective drive. He has able assistants on the distaff side from Sara Seegar, who really knows how to capitalize on a good line or situation.

Others meriting salutes for outstanding services are William Mendrek, Kenneth Forbes, Mitchell Agruss, Ernest Sarracino, Jerry Jarrett, Mike Kellin, Tad Mosel, Bernard Kates, Ty Perry, Maxine Stuart, William Lanteau and John Shellie.

While "At War With the Army" is not a critic's play, it is only fair to report that a majority of the friendly first-nighters roared lustily throughout the evening. They found the on-stage antics immensely enjoyable, unless appearances be deceiving.

Your drama reporter regrets that he was able to share their appreciation only on occasion. "At War With the Army" is such amiable, ingratiating farce that it is not a pleasant duty to cast a negative ballot. It seems, at best, a portent of a more worthy play yet to come from Allardice's typewriter.